DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 491 SO 021 249

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TITLE Aesthetics in Art Education: A Look Toward Implementation. ERIC Digest.

INSTITUTION Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for Art Education, Bloomington, IN.; ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Getty Center for Education in the Arts, Los Angeles, CA.; Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-SO-90-11
PUB DATE Dec 90
CONTRACT RI880062009
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aesthetic Education; *Art Education; Curriculum Design; *Curriculum Development; Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; Philosophy
IDENTIFIERS *Aesthetics; *Discipline Based Art Education; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Aesthetics, or the philosophy of art, is perhaps the most troublesome discipline advocated in a discipline-based approach to art education. It is troublesome for many reasons, including its largely verbal nature and the lack of experience of most art teachers with its content and modes of inquiry. Nevertheless, aesthetics can serve as a basis for all other content in an art curriculum because of its nature and its foundation of general questions about all works of art. Issues examined in this digest include: (1) relating aesthetics to art education; (2) placement of aesthetics in the art curriculum; (3) philosophical inquiry in art education; and (4) reconstruction of aesthetics in art education. A 9-item reference list concludes the digest. (DB)

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by
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ERIC Digest EDO-S0-90-11 December 1990

Aesthetics in Art Education: A Look Toward Implementation

by Sally Hagaman

Aesthetics, or the philosophy of art, is perhaps the most troublesome discipline advocated in a discipline-based approach to art education. It is troublesome for many reasons, including its largely verbal nature and the lack of experience of most art teachers with its content and modes of inquiry. Nevertheless, aesthetics can serve as a basis for all other content in an art curriculum because of its nature and its foundation of general questions about all works of art. Problems examined in this ERIC Digest include (1) relating aesthetics to art education, (2) placement of aesthetics in an art curriculum, (3) philosophical inquiry in art education, and (4) reconstruction of aesthetics in art education.

Problems of Relating Aesthetics to Art Education. There still is confusion between understanding aesthetics as an adjective (as in "aesthetic scanning") and *aesthetics* as a noun (as in the philosophy of art), a distinction made clear years ago by Sharer (1983) and others. Aesthetic scanning clearly is a method of art criticism, of responding to a *specific* work or body of work. *Aesthetics* historically is a branch of philosophy with its own substantive content. This content deals with *general* questions about art such as "What is art?", "What's the difference between a work of art and a copy?", "Are there criteria that can be used in evaluating all works of art?", and "Is the concept of *originality* in art a meaningful one?"

This simplistic explanation of aesthetics does little to clarify its potential role in a K-12 art curriculum. If we look at the writings of aestheticians and their ongoing debates about questions such as those, we may remain puzzled about the discipline and its proposed place in art education. I have advocated study of philosophical aesthetics by art educators (Hagaman 1988) although I realize that a typical university aesthetics course or reading essays about aesthetics on an individual basis offer little sense of how such scholarly and often dull writings relate to what happens in an art class.

Another problem in dealing with aesthetics as a major aspect of art education is lack of available models for curriculum and instruction. The best models come from philosophy and, most directly, programs designed to foster philosophical inquiry with children and others who are naive about philosophy. Some argue that children are naturally philosophers because of their sense of wonder and constant inquiry about things adults take for granted. Curriculum materials and pedagogical methods that have proved valuable in fostering philosophical inquiry and reflective thinking with students share two major characteristics:

(1) The philosophical issues are couched in ordinary language, avoiding scholarly terminology or jargon, and are placed in specific contexts designed to elicit understanding and build interest on the part of students.

(2) There is a concerted effort to encourage dialogue among students about issues because such dialogue is seen as the best way to experience reflective thinking and philosophical inquiry.

One approach to contextualizing issues of aesthetics is to use invented puzzle cases in which perplexing issues are embedded. An example is: "The Louvre is on fire. You can save either the 'Mona Lisa' or the guard who stands next to it, but not both. What do you do?" (Battin 1986). Dialogue based on resolving such a puzzle would involve the relative importance of aesthetic and ethical values. Another approach to contextualizing is to use current events that hold some aesthetic puzzle. An example is discussion based on a newspaper account of Ruby, an elephant at the Phoenix Zoo, who paints, creating "colorful, abstract works of art" (Lankford 1988). Is Ruby an artist? Is what she makes art? The most comprehensive approach to contextualizing philosophical issues is that of writing stories or novels in which such issues are embedded. The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) publishes a number of such texts and accompanying teacher's manuals with exercises and discussion plans.

Putting Aesthetics Into the Art Curriculum. Philosophical aesthetics must be *reconstructed* as an integral part of discipline-based art education. We don't need another discipline on top of what we already struggle to do in schools. Rather, we need to mix aesthetics throughout the curriculum by reconstructing ideas and experiences of aesthetics and adding those needed ingredients to our recipe for art education.

Why are these ingredients needed? There are two major reasons why study of philosophical aesthetics is important in art education. First, ideas from that discipline, and appropriate methods of dealing with those ideas, can connect disparate parts of an art curriculum. Art teachers know it is often difficult to make meaningful connections between various aspects of production such as 2-D and 3-D, fine arts and crafts, art history and art criticism, and, at the same time, integrate increasingly complex sets of content and methods. Because of the general nature of aesthetics, it can function as a binding agent for all this complexity.

Another reason is that philosophical aesthetics, like all philosophy, is based on wonder. Philosophers wonder about things others take for granted. Young children do the same until their sense of wonder is deadened by socialization, education, or some combination of the two. They reach a plateau in their sense of wonder and their willingness to express wonder as they reach a plateau in drawing development, usually around fifth or sixth grade. Ironically, it is at this point, around age twelve, that cognitive developmentalists such as Piaget say that children are ready to *begin* philosophy, having reached the stage of formal operations, the "age of reason" (Piaget 1950). It may be true that this is the appropriate time to teach formal logic, but it is late to *begin* dialogues with children about issues from aesthetics. We need to

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focus early on the openness, willingness to voice wonder, and desire to find meaning in problematic situations that may have no definitive solution, all of which characterize the young child. To say that young children cannot function as aestheticians is quite true; to say that they cannot engage in meaningful discussion of complex problems and situations is not.

Philosophy for Children. Recognizing the need for educational materials about aesthetics, I have investigated existing methods and materials that might serve as models for art education. Philosophers associated with the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children have helped develop and disseminate extensive curriculum materials about general philosophy for children including a number of novels, written for children of all ages, that incorporate issues from various fields of philosophy, such as metaphysics, logic, ethics, and aesthetics (Lipman 1974; Lipman & Sharp 1978; Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980; Reed 1989). There also are extensive teacher's manuals that accompany each text, filled with discussion ideas, exercises, and activities.

The main objective of this approach is to develop critical thinking skills and philosophical inquiry through class dialogue based upon the texts. Lipman and his associates believe that thinking about philosophical issues is best achieved through dialogue. Many people confound thinking *by* oneself with thinking *for* oneself and are under the mistaken impression that solitary thinking is equivalent to independent thinking. A discussion of issues embedded in a child-centered story draws upon the child's sense of wonder and develops critical thinking skills within the context of philosophy. Older children are taught formal logic, but at all levels children are encouraged to use informal logic or a 'good reasons' approach. There is a concerted effort to develop a community of inquiry, a class climate wherein each child feels comfortable to express an opinion or observation, with an end goal of largely 'student-student' rather than 'teacher-student' discussion. There are three important components of such a community:

1. Use of criteria: children are encouraged to examine and explain *why* they think as they do about certain issues being discussed. This process requires reasons for judgments and reflection upon criteria used in making judgments. An example is to determine what one's criteria for realism are after contending that realistic paintings are best.
2. Self-correction: Individuals are encouraged to listen carefully to comments of each group member and be willing to reconsider opinions. However, there is no attempt to come to a single 'correct' judgment for the group, as in the form of a vote. Such a grasp for consensus (democratic though it may seem) does little to encourage reflective thinking or dialogue and is a flawed attempt at closure in philosophical inquiry.
3. Attention to context: Understanding the important influence of context upon one's judgments and opinions is crucial. Insofar as knowledge is a historical, linguistic, and social construct, it is dependent on context.

Other approaches to teaching aesthetics that build upon dialogue include writing responses to philosophical questions, keeping art journals, and completing teacher-made worksheets. Any lesson that deals with aesthetics should approach the subject in a conceptually open manner, focusing on reflection and reason and rewarding recognition and attempted solutions of philosophical dilemmas on the part of students.

Reconstructing Aesthetics. I am now in the beginning stages of writing and field testing a series of art texts for grades 1-6. These texts, like the books of Lipman, Reed, and others, are populated with children who interact with their peers, families, and teachers, and include a small group of children who leave the art class each year and travel through time and space. They actively explore the meanings and contexts of art and the roles and status of artists within cultures they visit. Hence, the perennially occurring questions of aesthetics can be effectively and, it is to be hoped, enjoyably embedded within child-oriented stories. Perhaps more importantly, this approach allows a natural integration of art historical information and provides numerous opportunities for art criticism, history, and studio experiences. Another important aspect of this approach is its multicultural nature. It is increasingly important for all educators to provide meaningful knowledge and experience of many cultures for students.

The stories are divided into short episodes, designed to be read by or to children. Examples of subjects within episodes include a visit to a sacred cave in Mali where a Dogon man is carving a Kanaga mask, participation in a workshop in medieval Persia, joining a crowd watching Hokusai paint an image of the Buddha, or a visit to a contemporary Egyptian guild that produces tapestry weavings.

Conclusion. The approaches to integrating aesthetics in art education that have been discussed share the characteristic of putting philosophical problems into specific contexts accessible to students and encouraging classroom dialogue. Dialogue about aesthetics may be generated by historical, critical, or studio inquiries as students and teachers recognize and attempt to solve emerging philosophical issues. Puzzle cases, both invented and discovered, build student interest and help focus reflection and inquiry. Using art texts modeled after philosophy for children materials has the positive attributes of logical sequencing, recurrence of problematic issues, and variable unit emphases upon art production, historical, critical, and aesthetic inquiry experiences. Such an approach also builds upon a tradition of using textual stories in art education.

As in community of inquiry processes, any implementation of aesthetics in art education must utilize criteria, be self-correcting, and be sensitive to specific contexts. Meaningful integration of aesthetics in art education, however troublesome, is both necessary and possible as well as enjoyable.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are 703-404-1400 and 800-443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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This ERIC Digest was commissioned with support from the Getty Center for Education in the Arts. However, the views expressed are the author's and not necessarily those of the Getty Center or of the J. Paul Getty Trust. Support was also provided by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062009. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.